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Discrimination and religiosity among Muslim women in the UK before and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks

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Abstract

In January 2015, media outlets reported a series of attacks by Islamic terror groups in France, instigated at the offices of the Charlie Hebdo publication. Previous research has indicated that the consequence of exposure to terrorist attacks can extend beyond the immediate victims, with a potentially international reach. This secondary data analysis compares the perceptions of discrimination, religiosity and religious engagement of 240 Muslim women in the UK, recruited before and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. The results indicate greater religious engagement and perceptions of discrimination among those women recruited after the attacks. This suggests that the impact of such events may reach beyond the immediate victims, and societies need to develop and provide support in response to such attacks, regardless of the geographical location of the event.

On the 7th January 2015, two gunmen purporting to represent Islamist terror group Al-Qaeda, attacked the offices of Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris, France; which developed into two days of related attacks and police operations throughout France, resulting in the death of 18, including both gunmen. This study reports on a secondary data analysis of data collected from Muslim women in the United Kingdom, to investigate differences in levels of discrimination and Islamic religiosity among recruited to the primary study before and after the Charlie Hebdo attack.

Research has indicated that direct and indirect exposure to traumatic and terrorist events can have detrimental consequences for both well-being and intergroup, extending beyond the immediate victims to include relatives (Shevlin & McGuigan, 2003; Siermarco et al, 2012), the wider community (Galea et al., 2002), and subsequent generations (McAloney, McCrystal, Percy & McCartan, 2009; Rakoff, 1966). Increasingly there have been suggestions that terrorist events transcend national boundaries in their influence on health and well-being, due in part to global exposure through the media (Metcalf, Powdthavee & Dolan, 2011; Sheridan & Gillet, 2005).

Within the last twenty years there has been an increase in terrorist events linked with extremist Islamic organisations in the Western world. Alongside this increase have been reports of greater levels of discrimination towards Muslims, which can be mapped alongside the occurrence of these events. Research indicates that following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States there were increases in reported discrimination towards Muslims in the US, and in hate crimes (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003; Balsano & Sirin, 2007; Cainkar, 2004). Reports of increases in discrimination were not isolated to the United States where the attack occurred, but have been reported in the United

Kingdom. Sheridan and Gillett (2005) reported higher levels of discrimination among both Muslim and Hindu individuals in the UK, following the 9/11 (11th September 2001) terrorist attacks in the USA. While Metcalfe, Powdthavee and Dolan's (2011) secondary data analysis of the British Household Panel Survey data highlighted poorer well-being among those individuals interviewed in Britain after the 9/11 attacks compared with those interviewed before it. Most recently Choma, Charlesford, Dalling, and Smith (2015) have reported that viewing footage of the 9/11 attacks was associated with increased Islamophobia.

Religiosity, the cognitive dimensions related to religious involvement and beliefs (Bergan & McConatha, 2000), can also play an important role in how individuals deal with such events. Siermarco et al (2012) reported that after the 9/11 attack, over a fifth of surveyed participants, drawn from the population of those bereaved in the attack, reported changes in the level of importance of their religious beliefs (11% increased importance, 10% had decreased importance), with decreases in importance of religious beliefs associated with poorer mental health outcomes. The influence of religiosity is not just confined to those victimised by the attacks, but has been identified as an important factor in how members of religious groups interpret events, and how they respond to the social consequences for members of their religious groups. For example, Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader (2008) reported that Arab Americans, regardless of their religion, relied on religious coping to deal with stressors such as increases in fear of being a target of hate crimes, anxiety, isolation, and stigma following 9/11. Additionally for Muslims, acts which are perceived to misrepresent Allah or Islam can be interpreted as desecration of Islam. Religious coping has been found to mediate the relationship between such desecration and trauma among Muslims living in the United States (Abu-Raiya, Pargament & Mahoney, 2011). Arguably both the depictions of Mohammad and Islam by the Charlie Hebdo organisation which were identified by the terrorists as justification for the attacks; and the act of terror itself, may be interpreted by

some Muslims as acts of desecration; who may therefore seek solace within their religion to deal with the event.

However, it must be noted that the nature of such attacks makes research into the consequences particularly difficult, relying on secondary data analysis of existing research. This study is a secondary data analysis of data collected as part of a research project investigating the experiences of Muslim women living in the United Kingdom, which happened to involve data collection over a period preceding and following the Charlie Hebdo attacks. This paper therefore aims to explore differences in discrimination and religious practices among these two cohorts of Muslim women living in the United Kingdom; those who participated in the primary study prior to the first attack on 7th January 2015, and those who participated after the attack.

Method

Participants

288 individuals responded to the survey, however, 47 individuals were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion, leaving an effective sample of 240 Muslim women. The sample ranged in age from 18 – 49 years, with a mean age of 23.6 years (sd = 5.20 years). Just over half (55.8%) were born in the United Kingdom, and the majority (70%) were born into Islam. Two thirds (65%) reported being single, while the rest were married. 87 participants (36%) participated in the survey after the Charlie Hebdo attacks on 7th January 2015 in Paris, France.

Measures

As part of a study on the experiences of Muslim women living in the UK participants were asked to complete an online survey which collected information on demographics, Islamic religiosity, engagement in Islamic religious practices and discrimination.

Demographic variables: Participants were asked to indicate their sex (inclusion criteria check), age, religion (inclusion criteria check), whether Muslim since birth or converted/reverted to Islam later in life, marital status.

Islamic religiosity: The 23-item Sahin-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Islam (Sahin & Francis, 2002) and the 17-item The Sahin Index of Islamic Moral Values Scale (Francis, Sahin & Al-Failakawi, 2008) were included as measures of religiosity. Both scales have 5-point Likert response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicating positive attitudes towards Islam and agreement with Islamic moral values, respectively. Both original scales have been reported as highly reliable (Francis, Sahin & Al-Failakawi, 2008; Sahin & Francis, 2002) while with the current sample both scales demonstrated acceptable reliability, although this was somewhat higher for the the Sahin-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Islam ($\alpha = 0.94$) than the Sahin Index of Islamic Moral Values Scale ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Engagement in Islamic religious practices: Thirteen items were included to assess engagement with behavioural components of Islamic faith. These asked participants to indicate how frequently (1 = never, 5 = very often) they participated in activities associated with the Islamic faith including, prayer 5 times per day, attending mosque, and reading the Qu'ran. A single behavioural engagement score was computed as the sum of these items, with high scores indicating higher engagement. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 indicated that this scale was reliable.

Discrimination: The Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams, Jackson & Anderson, 1997) was included to assess perceptions of discrimination. Participants were asked how frequently in their day-to-day life (1 = never, 5 = very often) they experience discrimination by rating their experience of 9 items. The Cronbach's alpha with the current sample showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Procedure

The study was approved by the ****REMOVED FOR PURPOSES OF BLIND REVIEW****.

Participants were recruited online using the social media website Youtube, through which a slide show of information was presented, alongside a link to the online survey; the clip was posted on a Youtube channel, facilitated by the host/owner, with a primary focus on education and discussion about Islam. In addition, participants were further recruited through Muslim support agencies nationally, where information was provided by email to member lists by these organisations on behalf of the research team. Data were analysed in SPSS and independent samples t-tests performed to investigate differences in the constructs between those individuals participating in the survey before the Charlie Hebdo attack, and those participating in the days afterwards.

Results

As can be seen in table 1 there were no significant differences in attitudes towards Islam, or Islamic moral values between the sample of women who participated in the survey prior to the attack, and those who participated after; but there were significant differences in engagement in Islamic religious practices and in discrimination. Participants completing the survey after the attack reported significantly higher levels of Islamic religious practices and significantly higher discrimination than those who completed the survey prior to the attack.

Discussion

The results support prior research indicating that acts of terrorism have repercussions beyond the country in which the attacks occurred (Metcalf, Powdthavee & Dolan, 2011; Sheridan & Gillett, 2005). Muslim women living in the UK who participated in the days following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, reported greater exposure to discrimination than women who participated prior to the attack. This highlights an potentially important facet of

intergroup relations in multicultural societies such as the UK, whereby responses to religious group members are influenced by acts committed by individuals or groups claiming representation of the religious group. Additionally this study highlights an increased report in religious coping, operationalized as greater engagement in Islamic religious practices, among women after the attacks, which confirms previous research in this area (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008).

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to make assertions as to the reasons for this increase in religious coping; however, a number of explanations for such an increase are relevant. For example, Aydin, Fischer and Frey (2010) and Bierman (2006) have reported religiosity to play a potentially role during exposure to heightened discrimination. Given the increased reports of discrimination in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, these women may have further engaged in religious practices in order to buffer the effects of this discrimination. Several studies have reported that perceived discrimination against ones' group increases identification with it (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). This might happen because group members respond to perceived threat, by increased unity through greater engagement with group members and practices, which results in increased identification with the group. As noted by Abu-Raiya, Pargament and Mahoney (2011) heightened religious engagement among Muslims may be in response to a perceived desecration of Islam. Arguably both the content of the Charlie Hebdo magazine, and the attacks themselves could be perceived by individuals as acts of desecration. The Charlie Hebdo magazine was reportedly targeted as a result of sartorial depictions of the prophet Mohammed. The attacks on the magazine may have brought these depictions to the notice of the wider Muslim community, beyond the ordinary scope of the magazine readership, and exposure to this content resulted in heightened religious coping. Alternatively, as a religion advocating peace, many Muslims may have found the act of violence perpetrated in the name

of their religion to be a desecration in itself, and thus employed religious coping mechanisms to assist in reconciling this representation of Islam with their own religious beliefs. Further research which aims to explore the reasons underlying religious responses to terrorist attacks would be beneficial to understand the nature of religious coping in traumatic events such as terrorist attacks.

However, a number of limitations of this research must be noted. Firstly this analysis is a secondary data analysis, which has implications for the sampling and the nature of the analysis. This research focused on the experiences of women resident in the UK, and therefore is not representative of the Muslim population in the UK, or internationally. However, the female only sample was recruited as part of a primary study on experiences of Muslim women in the UK. While no substantive reason exists to have excluded men from this analysis, the nature of the primary study from which the data has been drawn has resulted in a female only sample. Further research which investigates the impact of such events on males is certainly warranted, but the opportunity to collect primary data on such events is restricted by the nature of the events themselves. It must be noted, however, that Muslim women are a particularly interesting population for discrimination research, given the heightened religious visibility among these women in Western cultures, as a consequence of Islamic dress codes for women (Meer, Dwyer & Modood, 2010).

Furthermore this analysis has emerged as a consequence of appropriate data collected during a primary study, investigating experiences of Islamic women in the UK, and this analysis represents an opportunistic secondary data analysis due the timing of the data collection, which spanned a period preceding and succeeding the July attacks. While longitudinal research is optimal for investigating the impact of interventions or events, the nature of such terrorist events, which cannot be foreseen by the research team, preclude the planning of such a research study; rather the authors have relied on secondary data analysis of data from the

population of interest, and as such limited in terms of analysis and interpretation of the results.

Sampling concerns also exist with regard to the cohort of women who engaged with the survey after the Hebdo attacks took place, as it may have been that Muslim women have actively sought out the survey in the wake of the attacks to demonstrate their commitment to Islam, or to access a forum to present their experiences, which may have introduced bias into the reports of religious engagement.

Additionally while the authors have noted differences in religious engagement across the two cohorts of women, and made suggestions as to possible reasons for these differences, these must be interpreted with caution. As indicated previously questions addressing the reason for engaging in particular religious practices would have been of benefit in this analysis, however, again this is a consequence of the secondary data analysis.

The findings do, however, suggest different levels of discrimination towards Muslim individuals in the UK in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks; supporting previous findings of international effects of such events. Additionally, religious engagement was higher among those responding after the attack, which may reflect coping mechanisms among individuals from religious groups linked to such attacks. This suggests a need to provide support for minority religious group members in response to religiously orientated attacks, both in terms of backlash from the wider public, and in dealing with the event itself as a reflection on their religious group, despite the geographical distance from the event.

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Table 1:

Independent samples t-tests comparing participants completing the survey prior to the Charlie Hebdo attack with those completing the survey after the event

	Before Charlie Hebdo		After Charlie Hebdo		T (df = 238)
	\bar{x}	s.d.	\bar{x}	s.d.	
Attitudes to Islam	106.52	11.31	108.27	11.42	-1.15
Islamic moral values	70.78	7.78	71.18	7.61	-.385
Engagement in Islamic religious practices	34.32	5.57	36.04	5.86	-2.25*
Perceived discrimination	19.14	8.04	21.71	9.09	-2.27*

Notes: * = $p < 0.05$